

SOM- January 2009

Dear Dr. Clayman: We have a 24-year old son. His life is on hold. We're not sure that he's on drugs or what? He is unemployed. Never wants to leave the sofa. Cannot hold a job. Tends to be moody. His life seems like such a waste. Every time we approach him about doing something with his life, it quickly becomes a battle. He tells us that he hates us and resents his siblings. Is there any hope?

This is not an uncommon situation faced by well-meaning parents. Regardless of the reasons why such a state has occurred it becomes an emotional drain on everyone who tries to fix it. All forms of motivation seem to fail. Common-sense arguments evolve into pleading and even bribery, then onto frustration and outright hostility.

In many cases a systematic approach taking into consideration the unique characteristics of the problematic individual, as well as the rest of the characters in his life, may help. Sometimes it just takes a new variation of what has been tried before or a message delivered by someone who is not emotionally connected. However, more drastic efforts may be necessary, and such measures will not be easy. Furthermore, if you fail to hold a firm stance in such situations, you can rest assured that nothing will change.

The first step is to gain an understanding of your son from emotional, intellectual and social perspectives. It should be obvious that psychological problems including depression and anxiety need to be ruled out, as does the possibility of drug and alcohol abuse. In addition to properly assessing these issues other factors must be examined. Assuming he would not come to see a psychologist willingly, you might consider evaluating the following questions on your own:

- Has his approach to the world changed?
- Was he good in school or did he just get by?
- Has he had friends--or always been a loner?
- Has he ever learned to deal with failure?
- How does he compare himself to you (parents & siblings) with regard to achievement in life?
- Has anything ever motivated him?
- Has he suffered any setbacks from which he does not seem to have recovered?

Addressing these questions is a starting point, one that should spark some fresh insights and help to develop a picture of your unique situation.

Taking him off the couch and into the world will not occur in one giant step. If he has never excelled, he is not likely to want to go back to school or do anything that will present much of a challenge. As much as some people fear failing, others actually fear success because of the ongoing pressure they feel to sustain a winning approach in life. It will be necessary to figure out which of these impacts your son.

After a clear picture is developed about the possible underlying issues, realistic goals must be set. Implementation of a plan must be strategic. You must be prepared for all eventualities – good and bad – and not take a “Pollyanna” view that everything will work out based on good intent. The process will not be pleasant. A number of preset options must be in place before you start. Everyone involved in his life must be committed to following through with agreed upon actions.

Trying to overcome the resistance of your son has not been easy to this point and changing this pattern will be fraught with setbacks and some unexpected and even frightening twists. His behaviors are controlling you. This must change. You have to be willing to push him and learn how to ignore his verbal attacks and condemnation. When you stop allowing him to set the rules, he might escalate into more aggressive and destructive behavior toward property, himself or other people. It is likely that it will be necessary to withdraw any support and, with adequate warning, expel him from your home if he does not fulfill expectations set and enforced by you.

The sad fact is that this situation has arisen because you have let it do so. In these cases, there is a theme of emotional blackmail that permeates all interactions. Somehow he has been able to work on you and, until now, get away with externalizing blame and avoiding taking responsibility for his own actions. Loving him got you into this... Tough love will get you out.

As a word of caution, you probably need a professional who will help devise the initial game plan; provide you with support when you are wavering; and come up with new approaches as he presents you with new challenges in his desperate effort to maintain his non-productive lifestyle. In actuality, most of the solution rests with you and not anything that will be done to or with your son. The hope would be to bring him to some level of adult-like behavior. If this proves impossible, then you will need to find a way to make him feel the negative consequences, which will enable you go on with your life without guilt or feeling as if you have failed as a parent.

Sometimes it is good to know that the world *does* change. In my column about parity for mental health benefits, it turns out that I had missed a change in the attitude of business toward the bill passed last year. According to chief legal counsel for the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the US Chamber of Commerce and other business groups actively backed provisions in the legislation as of 2007. This is a welcome change from the past and, hopefully, a good sign for the future. I gratefully stand corrected.